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America's Prehistoric Islands

ARTICLE BY ROBERT BELOUS

JUST OFF THE COAST OF CALIFORNIA
LIES THE CHANNEL ISLAND CHAIN,
EIGHT INTRIGUING ISLES OF WHICH FIVE
ARE UNPEOPLED POCKETS OF PREHISTORY
TEEMING WITH PRIMORDIAL LIFE AND DEFENDED
FROM THE WORLD BY WILD WINDS AND CRASHING SURF

AS THE evening snarl of Los Angeles traffic oozes westward along the Santa Monica Freeway, the island of Santa Catalina suddenly looms from the horizon and conjures images of sun-soaked beaches and yachts bobbing lazily in the Pacific tides. Yet Catalina, popular, civilized and resort-ridden, offers no hint of the strange and primeval beauty of its sister islands that lie just over the horizon.

Of the eight islands in the Channel Island chain, Catalina's two seaward neighbors, San Nicolas and San Clemente, are both administered by the Department of the Navy, the former as a missile tracking station and the latter as a bombing range. The remaining islands, however, often referred to as the "northern five," are the most unique and unspoiled of the entire group. Their pristine state and unusual, sea-spawned environment have brought forth a Congressional proposal for their designation as an off-shore national park.

San Miguel, by far the most unique of the Channel Islands, is presently off limits to the public because of its undecided status as either a national park or a target for the Navy's bullpup missiles. Recently, however, I had the good fortune of visiting San Miguel, along with a team of naturalists bent upon exploring this curious isle before its possible destruction by Navy missile marksmen.

Aboard a National Park Service patrol craft, we endured two lurching and spray-drenched hours before gaining the lee of San Miguel's only sheltered anchorage. While ducking the last of the flying brine, it occurred to me that we were about to drop anchor at the exact spot where Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, the famed Portuguese navigator, found safe harbor in 1542.

After wetly beaching our raft, we invaded an uninhabited island out of the past. Our biologist went in

search of a denning pair of the distinctive San Miguel fox; on a nearby hillside, the botanist sank reverently to his knees fondling a specimen of *Dudleya Pulverulenta*, or live-forever; and the two park service "archeology-types" retreated a thousand years as they began prowling one of the island's ancient Chumash village sites, marked by the large, bluish midden pile, actually a heap of discarded abalone shells. Since we beached about midway on this Manhattan-sized island, I faced a five-mile hike to the great elephant seal rookeries of Bennett Point.

The halfway mark found me wandering through one of the island's bizarre caliche forests. Protruding everywhere from the restless sands were gnarled and weird-looking fingers, even hands, all a ghostly gray in color and endless in shape and form. Some were suggestive of the tortuous roots and branches from an elfin forest, and this holds a clue to their origin: Shrubs, bushes, and even trees, all representing species long gone from the island, were overwhelmed in eons past by wind-driven sand; the buried roots and branches eventually decomposed and left sand-hardened molds, and these in turn were filled by leaching calcium carbonate. Solidified by age, and ready for their debut, they were exposed once again by the shifting sands, becoming what is currently thought to be the most highly developed caliche forest in existence.

While crouching to photograph an especially weird caliche sculpture, a furred and puckish face popped out of the grass nearby. After a long and deliberate look, a slender, russet-colored fox stepped cautiously out of the past to examine the strange intruder. It was barely the size of a Texas jackrabbit, and it was also quite unafraid. Narrow slits for eyes are thought to have evolved with this seaside fox in response to ages of wind and blowing

sand. But it is also suspected that the San Miguel fox shares his island, and himself, with a native tick, which is attracted to the corners of the eyes. Besides causing a rather fetching narrowness of the eye, it can and often does lead to blindness.

I could hear the wild cacophony of the rookeries long before I got there. Yet, I was still unprepared for what I saw. Amid the bleaching remnants of wrecked hulls, perhaps 2,000 marine mammals clustered upon a neck of land hardly one-half mile long: Guadalupe and Alaska fur seal, California sea lions and an immense flotilla of sunning elephant seals. Here were countless tons of mammalian flesh, great primeval sea beasts, all nurtured and sustained by the sea's vast bounty.

The elephant seal spends most of the year out at sea in a little-known migration pattern. They feed for many months on ratfish, squid, and even small shark, and return to several select islands along the California and Mexican coasts for the February breeding and calving season.

The mature elephant seal cows are collected into large harems, each with a colossal and dominant bull loitering close by. Unlike the docile cows, mature sea elephant bulls during the breeding season are highly aggressive and protective of their harems. Bulls will challenge one another for possession of a harem with loud and penetrating vocal threat calls, and a well-matched and aggressive pair will engage in fierce and bloody combat. Mature bulls may weigh as much as a staggering 8,000 pounds and may extend almost twenty feet in length.

Spending a night on the beach with such company can be an unsettling experience. Unruly cows that stray from harems must be rounded up and brought back. Bulls that tend to this chore also stray into the territory of other dominant bulls. This brings on





Opposite: Huge arch rock heralds advent of eerie Anacapa Island, whose crumbling bluffs are festooned with every kind of sea bird. **Top:** Oil-soaked seal fights for life after Union Oil's infamous Santa Barbara blowout. **Right:** Bull sea elephant takes threat stance.

vocal challenges that fill the night with dawn-of-the-world sounds, and induces wide-eyed staring rather than sleep.

In pre-dawn gloom I began picking my way along the edge of a loose pad of unattended cows which turned out to be strays from a nearby harem. Sensing an invader, a massive bull charged across the sand at a frightening speed and swung into position between the ladies and me. A mere pebble's toss away, and with his furious tonnage primed for combat, he threw his head far back in the typical threat stance and roared into the dawn air. Roosting gulls took flight far down the beach. While envying their wings, I caught a strange picture from another world—crusty and brine-soaked hide, sea wrack, the loud brutish breathing—all part of a bold life-force in motion long before my forerunners crept from the same salty world. I cautiously backed away, never to forget this dawn event.



The great elephant seal is so named because of his nose. In the males, this over-sized appendage acts as a resonating chamber during vocalization. The challenge call resembles an anchor chain rattling through a hawsepipe. Astonishingly, this hair-raising and primordial call, according to studies conducted by Dr. Burney J. LeBoeuf, of the University of California, Santa Cruz, is subtle enough to have dialectic variations according to geographical location very much like human dialects.

In retracing my steps down a strip of beach I suddenly found myself sharing a narrow-walled grotto with about a dozen elephant seals, all huddled and dozing. Though sub-adults, and of the fairer sex, many exceeded 2,000 pounds in weight. As I approached, however, they cowered along the rocky wall in abject retreat. The timidity of these enormous cows seemed incongruous, and this natural meekness has worked toward their demise. The elephant seal, though now in a strong comeback, was brought to the brink of extinction by a mass slaughter for blubber and lamp oil. Their only defense was to stare with big brown eyes at their approaching killers.

Unwittingly, we have continued the assault. During March, 1969, the beaches of the Bennett Point rookery sustained heavy oil pollution from the blowout of the Union Oil drilling rig in the Santa Barbara Channel. Though not widely reported, many elephant seal pups became helplessly coated with the tarlike crude oil, as were countless young sea lions. Animals attempting to preen would ingest the toxic oil and fatally ulcerate internally. Also, many sea lion pups were abandoned because the oil tended to cloud natural identification odors used by the parent animal. The cumulative effects of oil pollution on the Bennett Point marine ecosystem will be many years in evaluation.

Some measures that would help preclude a reoccurrence may be on the way, however. "Due to overriding environmental considerations," Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton has cancelled several existing offshore oil drilling leases in the Santa Barbara Channel. Even more hopeful, California Senators Alan Cranston and John Tunney are cosponsoring a bill for national park status for the Channel Islands and their surrounding waters. No remaining wonder of the world would be more worthy of protection.

These islands are unique partly because they were not always islands. During the dim beginnings of our planet, while continents had not yet come to rest, the Channel Islands were part of the mainland. During subsequent upheavals of the earth's crust, a general subsidence took place and a great



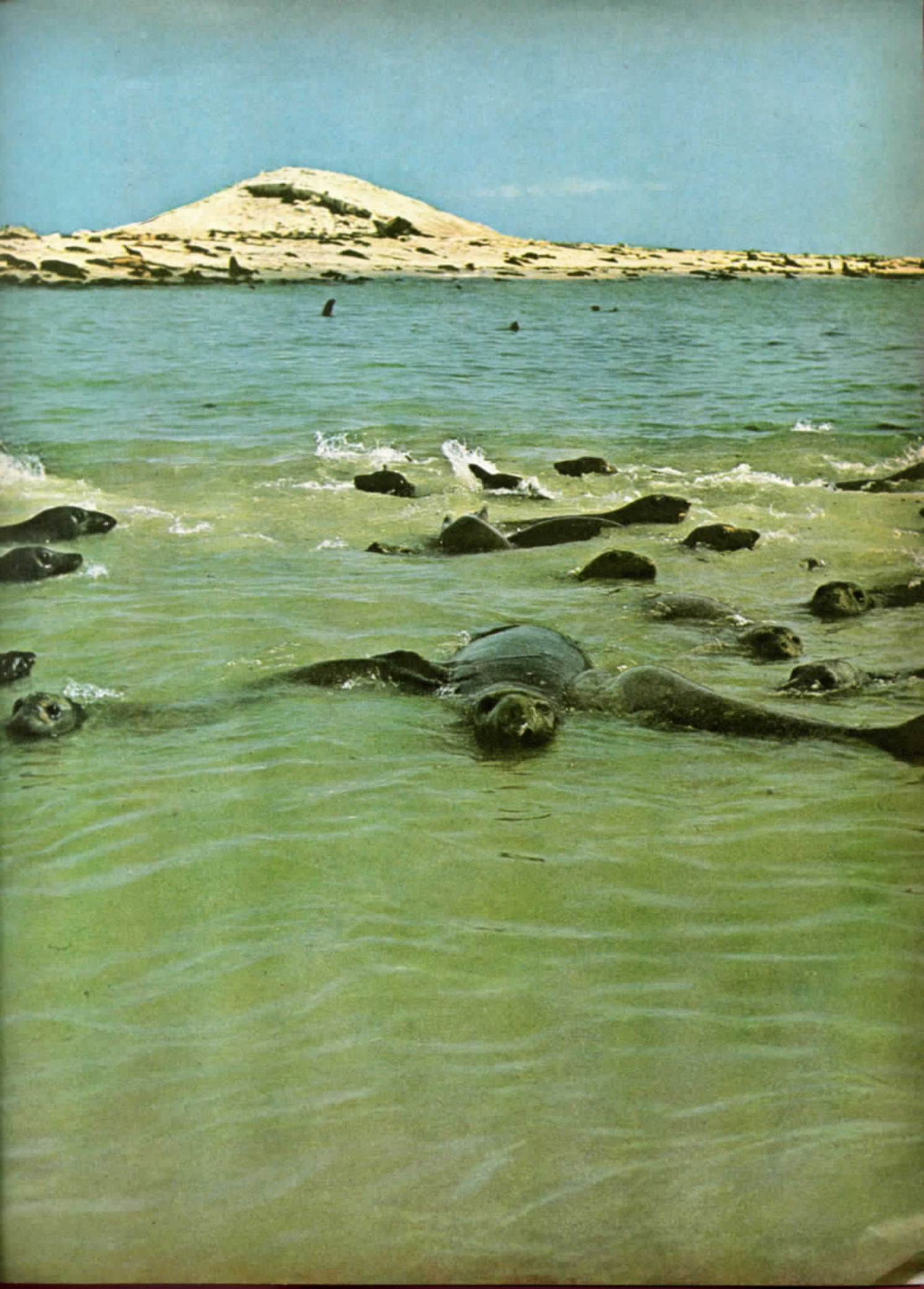
Top: Monument on San Miguel Island marks 1542 landing site of explorer Juan Cabrillo. **Above:** Also on San Miguel, this caliche forest may be most highly developed in existence.

coastal land mass eventually submerged, leaving eight small mountaintops protruding above the Pacific Ocean. At the time the water barrier was established, the animal and plant life of the islands was essentially the same as on the mainland. During the eons that followed, however, some of the island creatures and plants began to wander along diverse courses of evolution, and, therefore, many are native only to these disconnected bits of California.

It has been said that these islands "are of the sea," and they look it. Anacapa, the gateway island, is marked by an enormous arch rock, carved by eons of wind and crashing surf and resembling the bowed spine of a sea monster. Lying a scant fifteen miles from the mainland, Anacapa's bluffs and sea grottoes have become a playground for savvy boaters and divers.

On Anacapa, sea birds are everywhere. Its crumbling bluffs are festooned with cormorants and gulls; auklets and oyster-catchers poke through tide-pools, and shearwaters skim the waves. The island also offers a final look at the brown pelican, as it glides imperturbably by on its way to extinction. (The pelican's body retains high amounts of the hard pesticide DDT, which interferes with normal calcium production.) Across Anacapa's fields of prickly-pear cactus, where pelicans have raised their young for untold ages, the nests now hold a waste of crushed eggs all leaking their precious genetic codes into the hot sun. Soon there will be only the cactus.

Pod of elephant seals loll offshore at Point Bennett on San Miguel, the most primitive island in the Channel chain.





At Albert's Anchorage, Santa Cruz, sits row of grass huts and sign reading "Tropical Village—Live like the Polynesians and really enjoy nature."

Santa Barbara Island, Anacapa's twin in size, is a 650-acre rolling and treeless plateau, with almost no sandy beach at all. Instead, the island's rim is riddled with sea caves and deep grottoes. The sea swells pounding at this tortuous shoreline prevade the island with the sounds of low thunder. When seas are running high the piston-like action of the waves compresses air deep within the caves until it explodes upward through blowholes, often with a force that hurtles chunks of rock through the air like shrapnel.

Inland from its sea-tortured cliffs, Santa Barbara is a placid garden. Escapees from Los Angeles brave the thirty-eight wave-tossed miles to camp, fish, or just wander through the world's largest field of giant coreopsis, a sunflower species that has survived a half-million years of isolation.

The combined size of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa, the two largest islands, exceeds 117,000 acres, or better than two times the size of Seattle. Both islands are privately owned. Ranching interests graze sheep and cattle along the rolling bluffs of these islands, and have been less than enthusiastic toward having the islands become part of a national park. Instead, rumors circulate telling of posh fly-in resort development, complete with manicured golf courses and chaperoned game hunts for feral hogs, tule elk or imported Siberian snow deer.

A few marks of synthetic adventure have already appeared along Santa Cruz's wild shoreline. At Albert's Anchorage, for example, a row of tacky grass shacks and a leaning outhouse line the beach, while a nearby sign calls to passing boatmen, TROPICAL VILLAGE—LIVE LIKE THE POLYNESIANS AND REALLY ENJOY NATURE.

Where still unspoiled, both Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa islands teem with life. Coastal rocks and beaches are littered with sunning seals and sea lions; pods of gray whales, en route from Arctic waters to Baja calving grounds, ghost by the lush kelp beds, often with a killer whale not far behind. Hawks riding the thermals glide high over bluffs and headlands. When evening shadows gather in the canyons, the sharp yip of the island fox can be heard far out on the Pacific swells. This tiny fox has been in island confinement so long that its taxonomic species is termed *Littoralis*, fox of the sea-coast.

Prior to the coming of white men, large and prosperous tribes of coastal Chumash Indians gleaned their living from the rich ocean bounty. They harvested fish, abalone and mussels for food. Dome-shaped huts were fashioned with sea grasses used to thatch roofs and whalebone for walls. Today, we find smiling killer whales carved in soapstone, shell necklaces and cave walls decorated with drawings telling

of a life of plenty. The Chumash, from archeological clues and from the records of early Spanish explorers, were a contented and affable people.

With the arrival of explorers, fur hunters and missionaries, these island Indians encountered white man's maladies. Those that survived influenza and Christianizing finally were lost to the ethnic dislocation of mainland California. Not one Chumash has survived the encounter.

The western shore of Santa Rosa Island is where the exploits of weekend yachtsmen come to an end. As a warning to those in search of sluggish coves and "tropical villages," a dying freighter, the *SS Chickasaw*, lies hard aground with its back broken across an off-shore reef, fair warning of what lies to the west. Separating Santa Rosa from San Miguel Island is a two-mile strait in which ocean swells rolling in from Japan clash with shoals and tide rips. The result is a barrage of churning white foam. "I've seen it blow the feathers off a sea gull," our grizzled ex-Navy skipper mumbled respectfully into the wind.

Primeval San Miguel is the last and most remote of the Channel Islands, and it is this exotic piece of real estate that best illustrates why the islands should be designated a national park: Their sea-spawned environment is unique in America, and should be protected for posterity. □